

# Buxbury Clipper

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## America's first canal?

Records show Cut River one of America's first man-made waterways

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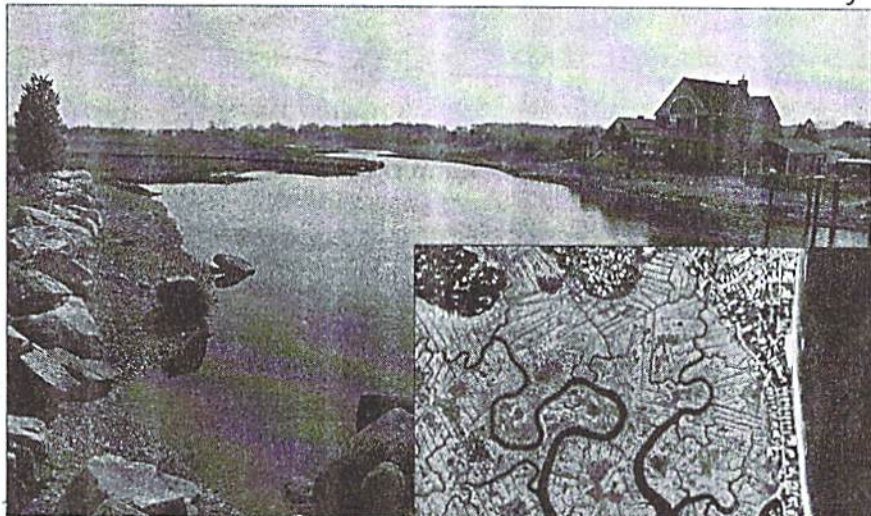
One of the country's first public works projects was commissioned in Duxbury, a waterway leading from the Back River in Duxbury to Green Harbor in Marshfield. But not only were the early settlers asked to give their money — they also had to give their time, bringing shovels and tools to widen the waterway, which may be the first man-made canal in the country.

The project is recorded in the early records of Plymouth Colony, in a book of laws from 1636 kept at the Plymouth County Registry of Deeds. The Cut River proclamation is one of several notable land records on display in the front lobby of the new Registry building on Obery Street in Plymouth.

When the building was first built, the committee overseeing the work wanted to highlight the historic nature of the registry's records.

"We wanted to use the new building as an opportunity," said Plymouth County Register of Deeds John Buckley. "We thought we could really show off the respect we have for what we do."

One of those historic re-



The Cut River Canal allowed ships to travel between Duxbury and Marshfield during Pilgrim days without going around the Gurnet. The canal has filled in over years of disuse but is still traversed by kayakers and canoes.

These meandering canals are all that's left of the Cut River Canal, part of a Pilgrim-era waterway that stretched from Plymouth to Marshfield. Regular use of the canal stopped about 1850.



ords is a court order from 1636 which describes a court order to enlarge "The Cutt at Marshfield."

"It is also ordered by the Court that the Cutt at Greenes

Harbor for a boate passage shalbe made eightene foote wide and sixe foote deepe," reads the proclamation. It says men would work ten at a time on the canal, under the direction of the colony's governor.

The impetus for the canal was to find a safer way for boats to travel up the coast from Plymouth to Marshfield and points north. Before the canal, sailors would have to go out around Gurnet Point, which could be a dangerous journey.

"It was more to benefit commerce than anything else,"

said Tony Markella, a former Duxbury resident. Markella is on a subcommittee of the registry's building committee, the Historic Display Committee.

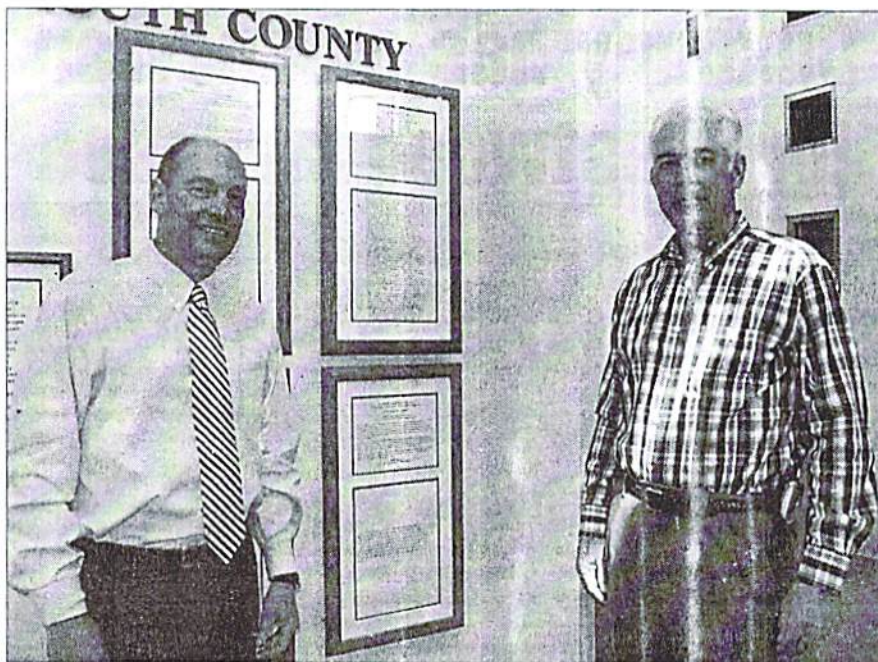
The Cut River Canal was also featured in a Yankee Magazine article from March 1966 entitled, "America's First Canal" by Edward Rowe Snow.

Snow wrote that the North River, South River and Cut River were all connected through Plymouth, Kingston and Duxbury to give boats safe passage.

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It is also ordered by the Court that the Cutt at Greenes Harbor for a boate passage shalbe made eightene foote wide and sixe foote deepe. And for the manner how the same shalbe done for the better ordering thereof it is referred to the Governour and Assistant w<sup>th</sup> the help of John Winslowe Jonathan Brewster John Barnes & Christopher Waddsworth aswell to pportion every man equally to the charge thereof as also to order men that shall worke thereat, that tenn men may worke together there at once, and that the Governour or whom he shall appoynt shall oversee the same that it may be well performed.





Plymouth County Registrar of Deeds John Buckley, and Tony Markella of the registry's building committee, stand before a display of historic deeds in the front lobby of the building in Plymouth. One of the records displayed is a court record for the Cut River Canal, which once connected the Back River in Duxbury and Green Harbor in Marshfield.

## Cut River Canal the original DPW project

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"New England mariners from almost the beginning of Pilgrim history have dreaded rounding the Gurnet Peninsula in bad weather," wrote Snow. "Probably it saved the lives of scores by offering a quiet inland waterway between Plymouth, Kingston and Duxbury and Marshfield, and avoiding the dangers of the North Atlantic."

The canal was built with the idea that it could be used

20 out of 24 hours in a day, impassable only at low tide.

The problem with maintaining the canals, Snow wrote, was that major storms caused the path of the river itself to shift across the marshes where it was dug. The Cut River Canal had to be "cleaned out" of debris and mud every year to keep it passable.

Snow found, while traveling up the old canal system for his Yankee article, that many Duxbury residents were unaware of the waterway's history.

"All this time we were meeting people whose summer residences bordered the Cut River — but of the Cut River they knew nothing!" he wrote. "It was quite an experience explaining to the people whose backyards we and the high tide had invaded that this was actually the earliest waterway in New England history."

By 1850, nautical technology had progressed to the point that Gurnet was no longer a danger, and the canal fell into disuse and mostly filled in. It can still be traveled by canoe

or kayak, however.

"Nevertheless, the first American canal in history is a pleasant reminder today of early Pilgrim industry," wrote Snow in his article.

The Cut River Canal is only one of many Duxbury-related historical records in the Plymouth County Registry's archives. They also have the deed for the John Alden House and the King Caesar House, as well as the deed to Duxbury Beach.

Markella said he recently found the deed to "The Cable House," a residence in Duxbury that served as the inland terminus for the second transatlantic telegraph cable. The cable originated in Brest, France and ended at Rosa's Hummock off Duxbury Beach.

The registry also has a rotating display of Plymouth County's early settlements. The current display focuses on Wareham, and Duxbury will be the next community highlighted.

"Duxbury has a lot of history to it," said Markella.